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ABSTRACT

Helping young children to cope with stress plays a vital role in today's classroom. It is normal for children to experience stress, which comes from pressures such as family, friends, and school. Some of the indicators of stress in young children are behavioral changes (e.g., mood swings, changes in sleep patterns, and incontinence) and physical changes (e.g., sighing, ready tears, fingernail biting, and trouble completing school work). The arts can act as a healing force. This includes storytelling, music, dance, and the visual arts. The process of art must occur in an environment where children feel safe. The psychosocial environment is created by the classroom teacher. Suggestions for preparation of the environment include (1) communicating the sort of environment desired, (2) initiating the conditions that lead to the desired environment, (3) remembering the importance of all classroom individuals, (4) creating a sense of belonging, (5) being fair to everyone, (6) delegating responsibilities to everyone, (7) being consistent, (8) practicing friendliness, (9) assuring success for everyone, (10) understanding when children are struggling with personal difficulties, and (11) laughing. (SM)

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Healing Art: Young Children Coping With Stress

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HEALING ART: YOUNG CHILDREN COPING WITH STRESS

As adults, we often look on childhood as a carefree and happy time. A time in life when no worries exist. The truth is, though, that everyone experiences stress - young children included - when they feel overwhelmed (Kidshealth, 1998). This paper will discuss causes and indicators of childhood stress, art as a healing force, and preparation of the classroom environment. Through such discussions we, as caretakers of young children, may find ways in which we can help them through stressful times.

Childhood Stress

It is normal for children to experience stress. Stress is caused by pressures from outside ourselves, such as family, friends, and school but also from within ourselves. These internal pressures are the most significant because we determine rules and standards for ourselves and when a discrepancy occurs between what we think we ought to be doing and what we are actually doing - we experience stress (Kidshealth, 1998). There are a wide variety of life experiences that cause stress in young children (McNamee & De Chiara, 1996). These may include issues of loss, separation from a parent, rejection, despair, frustration, anger, and powerlessness (Oehlberg, 1996).

Some of the indicators of stress in young children may include behavioral changes, such as mood swings, acting out of character, changes in their sleep patterns, and even incontinence (Kidshelath, 1998). Some physical effects include sighing, ready tears, fingernail biting, hair twirling or pulling or tossing, mouth noises (i.e., tongue clicking), and trouble completing schoolwork (JSU Wellness, 1996).

Art As A Healing Force

Visual expressions have been basic to humanity throughout history (Louisville, 1998). According to Artashealing (1998),

> The healing power of art and music has been known throughout history. In fact the first healing was music and dance in hunter gatherer cultures freeing what the Kalahari Bushman called healing "boiling energy.". Each night people of the tribe would dance wildly and go into a trance or meditative state. The people believed that the dance itself freed the person's own healing energy. Eventually, music and dance were combined with costumes and storytelling and with objects and paintings in the creation of a ritual that we would now call theater or performance art. But in ancient times this ritual was sacred and it was part of the culture's medicine.

It was not until the 1930's that art became a factor in some therapies (Louisville, 1998). For the sake of clarity, the term "art" in this discussion will refer to storytelling, music, dance, and the visual arts. A child's art production is a reflection of that child's development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts (Louisville, 1998).

So, how then, does art heal? According to Artashealing (1998), scientific studies show that art heals by changing a person's physiology and attitude. Artashealing (1998) further states that the body's physiology changes from one of stress to one of deep relaxation, from one of fear to one of creativity and inspiration. Art allows a person's perceptions of the world to change and in so doing - an attitude change that creates a hope and positivity and a means of coping with difficulties.

As children create art, it allows adults to understand an individual child's perceptions and reactions (McNamee & De Chiara, 1996). The art product becomes a visible or audible representation of that child's transformation and healing (Artashealing, 1998).

Preparation of the Classroom Environment

The process of art will occur in an environment where children feel safe, a place of no judgment, a place of trust and love. This psychosocial environment is created by the classroom teacher. Suggestions for preparation include:

1. Communicating the sort of environment desired
2. Initiating the conditions that lead to the desired environment
3. Remembering the importance of all classroom individuals

4. Creating the sense of belonging
5. Being fair to everyone
6. Delegating responsibilities to everyone
7. Being consistent
8. Practicing friendliness
9. Assuring success for everyone
10. Understanding when children are struggling with personal difficulties
11. Laughing

In conclusion, helping young children to cope with stress plays a vital role in today's classroom. Awareness of the causes of childhood stress and recognition of indicators is one of the first steps in helping children to cope and heal. The development of a conducive psychosocial environment and the employment of art will ensure that healing process.

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